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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 001219

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TW](#)

SUBJECT: KMT ENTERING LOCAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN WEAKENED POSITION

Classified By: Political Section Chief Dave Rank. Reasons: 1.4 (b/d)

**¶1.** (C) Summary: The ruling Kuomintang (KMT) on October 11 expelled seven mavericks who launched challenges to official party candidates in December elections for 17 mayors and county magistrates. The insurgents could foil the campaigns of at least a few KMT candidates, thereby providing momentum for the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) heading into next year's local elections for Taiwan's main population centers. President Ma Ying-jeou's opening to mainland China has yet to emerge as a major campaign issue, and cross-Strait policy probably won't be affected barring an unexpected KMT debacle at the polls. End summary.

KMT FACES PESKY CHALLENGES FROM WITHIN PARTY

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**¶2.** (C) The KMT on October 11 expelled seven members who defied its orders and launched challenges to party candidates in December local elections. (Note: One other member was expelled earlier, bringing to eight the number of rogue KMT candidacies. End note.) The number would have been higher if not for some last-minute arm-twisting by senior party officials just before candidate registration ended October 9.

Party insiders attributed the unusually large number of maverick candidates to President Ma's unwillingness or inability to threaten painful reprisals or to offer juicy inducements -- as his predecessors had -- to prevent mavericks from running. KMT Lawmaker Hwang Yih-Jiau also argued that grass-roots support was as important as party backing in some campaigns, particularly since the KMT was not as flush with money to back its candidates as it once was.

**¶3.** (C) Early handicapping by political pundits suggested the DPP should hang on to its three magistrate seats in Yunlin, Pingtung and Chiayi counties, and had a chance to capture KMT-controlled Nantou and Hsinchu counties because of the presence of multiple KMT candidates on the ballots. The KMT incumbent in Yilan County also could face a tough reelection battle because of his unpopularity stemming in part from having cancelled several widely enjoyed public events. The KMT-backed candidate in Hualien County also faces a strong challenge from two popular party renegades, but no DPP candidate is running in that race. Wu Szu-yao, a member of the DPP's Central Executive Committee, cautioned that her party should not be too optimistic about its chances of taking advantage of the KMT splits. She believed her party would probably retain its three magistrate sets and perhaps add another one or two.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE KMT, PRESIDENT MA, AND CHINA POLICY

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**¶4.** (C) Lawmaker Hwang said a pick-up of a few seats by the DPP, as predicted by Wu, would not be "the end of the world" for the KMT. Taiwan politics was not unlike a pendulum, swinging back and forth between parties, Hwang argued. After

the KMT landslide wins in legislative and presidential elections in 2008, the DPP could be expected to fare better in this year's local elections. Still, a loss of several magistrate seats would be a "warning" for the KMT and would be a humbling experience for President Ma, who will resume the party chairmanship on October 17.

15. (C) Kuo said city and county elections typically reflect a mixture of local and central government issues, and this year should be no different. The sluggish economy continues to be of concern to many, and voters in southern counties ravaged by Typhoon Morakot undoubtedly will factor in how local and central authorities responded to the disaster. Although rapprochement with China has been the signature policy of the Ma administration, there is little sign it will play a dominant role in the local election campaign. Some commentators believe Ma might use a strong DPP showing to urge China to help shore up his domestic political position by offering more concessions in cross-Straight negotiations. However, nothing short of a victory well beyond what even DPP stalwarts expect would likely change the current political calculus in which Ma heads the pack going into the 2012 presidential election.

COMMENT: IT'S MOSTLY ABOUT MOMENTUM

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16. (C) If nothing else, a strong DPP showing in December elections could provide the opposition party momentum going into next year's local elections for Taipei, Kaohsiung and Taiwan's other major population centers. Certainly, the DPP believes its strong showing in a legislative by-election in

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September boosted its prospects in the year-end vote. End note. President Ma's own political prestige will be much more at stake in 2010, when KMT candidates will have his clear imprimatur a year after he resumed the party Chairmanship.

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